

WILLIAMS, ARCHIBALD

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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Archibald Williams

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 4. Thurlow Weed's behavior during the Civil War seemed thoroughly out of character. In the past he had been largely indifferent to policy, but he became so upset at Lincoln's policies that he nearly broke with the administration.

gracious note in lieu of attending. He wrote the note, ironically, on election day:

Allow me to wish you a great success. With the old fame of the Navy, made brighter in the present war, you can not fail. I name none, lest I wrong others by omission. To all, from Rear Admiral, to honest Jack I tender the Nation's admiration and gratitude [.]

Lincoln was sincerely grateful for the sailors' services in the war, but politically he could have done without them. Jack Tar was a Democrat.

LINCOLN AUTOGRAPHED DEBATES: THE ARCHIBALD WILLIAMS COPY

This is the seventh article in a series on the signed presentation copies of the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858, in Illinois*. The copy bearing the inscription, "To Hon: Archibald Williams, with respects of A. Lincoln," was the property of Kenneth K. Bechtel of San Francisco when Harry E. Pratt wrote "Lincoln Autographed Debates" for *Manuscripts* in 1954. It is now the property of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. The library was unable to describe the book's history since Mr. Bechtel's ownership.

Archibald Williams was born in Kentucky in 1801. He came to Quincy, Illinois, in 1829. There he established a successful law practice. Quincy lay in what was called the Military Tract, the land between the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers most of which had been granted as bounties to soldiers in the War of 1812. Most of the veterans were forced to sell their claims to Eastern land speculators. Some lost them in tax sales, not realizing their liability to pay taxes on the claims. Questions of priority of ownership and clarity of title racked the Military Tract, and it became a paradise for lawyers (who could get good fees from the well-heeled speculators and their agents). Williams was soon noted for his abilities as a lawyer in land disputes.

Williams became acquainted with Lincoln when both men served in the Illinois Legislature at Vandalia in the 1830s. The Quincy Whig served in the Illinois Senate from 1832-1836 and in the Illinois House from 1836-1840. Usher F. Linder remembered Lincoln and Williams sitting near each other in the southeast corner of the old State House in Vandalia; they were "great friends," he said. Legal work also brought the two men together. Lincoln was associated with Williams in several cases and apparently took some of the Quincy lawyer's cases on appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court in Springfield.

Both former Kentuckians were Henry Clay Whigs. In 1848, when Lincoln dropped Clay for Zachary Taylor and some hope of winning, Williams was apparently slow to switch his loyalties. Lincoln told him flatly, "Mr. Clay's chance for an election, is just no chance at all." Both Williams and Lincoln were friends of Orville Hickman Browning, another Quincy lawyer and active Whig politician. "I know our good friend Browning," Lincoln told Williams, "is a great admirer of Mr. Clay, and I therefore fear, he is favoring his nomination." Lincoln instructed Williams to ask Browning "to discard feeling, and try if he can possibly, as a matter of judgment, count the votes necessary to elect him." Williams evidently jumped on the Taylor bandwagon, for, after the election, Lincoln wrote a letter recommending his appointment as U.S. District Attorney (Lincoln did not like the idea of rewarding holdouts for Clay's nomination with appointive offices). Williams gained the appointment and held office until the Democrats took over the Presidency in 1853. In 1852 he joined with Lincoln in organizing a meeting to express sympathy for Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth.

In 1854 Williams joined the many Illinois Whigs who denounced the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He ran for Congress, but, even with Lincoln's help (he came to Quincy to make a speech in Williams's behalf), he lost. Williams evidently had designs on the United States Senate seat to be filled by the state legislature in 1855. Lincoln wanted the seat too, but he explained to a legislator apparently pledged to Williams: "Of course I prefer myself to all others; yet it is neither in my heart nor my conscience to say I am any better man than Mr. Williams." Despite their competing ambitions, Lincoln and Williams were evidently in substantial agreement on political principles in this tumultuous period of confusing politics. Lincoln told one supporter in 1855 that a set of resolutions Williams had drawn up fairly accurately described the ground on which he would be willing to "fuse" with other anti-Nebraska groups. Three years later Williams was once again mentioned as a competitor for the Senate seat Lincoln sought in his historic campaign against Stephen A. Douglas.

Ambition for office did not drive the two men apart. The copy of the *Debates* which Lincoln gave Williams is some evidence of this (Lincoln also gave Williams's law partner Jackson Grimshaw a signed copy). Even more important was President Lincoln's appointment of Williams as U.S. District Judge in Kansas.

Usher Linder remembered Williams as a man "over six feet high, and as angular and ungainly in his form as Mr. Lincoln himself; and for homeliness of face and feature, surpassed Mr. Lincoln." Linder also recalled that Lincoln thought highly of Williams as "the strongest-minded and clearest headed man he ever saw." Linder, who knew both men in the legislature, was a Universalist in religion and thought everyone would go to heaven. If he was correct in his "views of the mercies of God," Linder said long after his old friend Archie Williams was dead, "he is now walking the golden streets with Douglas and Lincoln."

1860

